Western Research

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Guidance Document	Ethical Guidelines for Autoethnographic Research Involving "Others"
Effective Review	NMREB and HSREB - Delegated & Full Board
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Introduction:

Autoethnographic research, and similar methodologies (e.g., ethnography of the self) where the researcher is the "participant" or "subject" of the research reflecting on their own subjective experiences within a broader cultural or social context, is a distinct type of research that carries its own unique ethical considerations. Autoenthnographic work could include a group of researchers reflecting on their own subjective experiences on a collaborative, co-authored project. Autoethnographic work could also include research in which the researcher is but one, among other, participants.

Is REB oversight required for Autoethnographic Research?

Yes, there are instances in which REB review may be required for autoethnographic projects. This guidance document has been created to highlight potential ethical challenges in conducting autoethnographic research and assist researchers in understanding when an REB application is required. In addition, some guidelines are provided below to aid autoethnographers in determining how to approach their research in an ethical manner, as well as some suggestions for preparing their REB applications.

In some instances, ethical review from a Research Ethics Board (REB) is not required as the data is being contributed/collected by the same individual disseminating the findings, who will innately understand their own methodology, rights, risks, confidentiality limitations, etc. However, to the extent that autoethnographic and similar work involve other people (e.g., when personal reflections intersect with observations of others), specific ethical considerations are prudent prior to moving forward and disseminating this information. While the Tri-Council Policy Statement 2nd Ed. (2018) does not speak directly to this type of methodology, Western's REBs have identified portions of the TCPS2 which can be applied to this context, and which are noted throughout this document.

In one sense, the observations/reflections (or, data) about other people reported by autoethnographers (or others engaging in research 'on the self') may be classified as **secondary use of previously collected information** (see TCPS2 Articles 2.4, 5.5A, and 5.5B). This would describe information that was originally obtained for purposes other than research, such as during the course of one's daily life - particularly if these reflections are of a retrospective nature (e.g., reflecting back on an event or circumstance).

In the event of prospective encounters/reflections for the purposes of research using an autoethnographic (or similar) approach (e.g., intentionally going into an event with the awareness that observations will contribute to autoethnographic research), then it is possible that the ethical implications may be heightened (e.g., as there is potentially more opportunity for transparency with those who may be implicated, and/or there may be an increased possibility for a researcher to intervene and/or manipulate the environment and thereby frame the resulting

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observations in a particular way to support the research objectives). As such, these types of prospective projects might be more akin to **observational research,** which may or may not be subject to REB review (see TCPS2 Article 2.3 for more information on non-participant and participant observation).

It is also important to note that any intentional solicitation of responses from other people for the purposes of autoethnographic research (e.g., formal or informal interviews) requires REB review prior to engaging in such discussions.

Key Ethical Issues:

a. ***Identification of others*** – Does the research refer to specific individuals/groups? Will the researcher directly identify these individuals/groups in their research? Will pseudonyms be used? Will non-identifiable characteristics or experiences be included?
    - Researchers need to consider that if specific individuals/groups are informing the research, even if pseudonyms are used, the nature of details included in the research may lead readers to identify particular individuals and/or groups - particularly since the author/researcher's identity will be known. As such, consent, and potentially community engagement, may be needed in order to ethically use this information. REB review is strongly recommended in all cases where individuals may be identified, and required in cases where this identification may give rise to any identifiable risk.
    - Ideally, all information should be presented in a general way, minimizing the identifiability of any individuals/groups while still presenting sufficient information to make their argument and/or present their findings.
    - **Note:** If specific individuals/groups are not being identified/reported on in the research (i.e., instead only general social/cultural observations are included), REB review is not needed.

b. ***Reasonable expectation of privacy by others*** – Was the information originally obtained in a setting or circumstance that others would have expected would remain private?
    - If so, this would suggest that this information should not be disclosed without further consideration. REB review is required in order to ascertain whether consent and/or other measures are needed.
    - If the data is protected by some external duty of confidentiality (such as data obtained by a lawyer, psychologist, or physician), then the researcher must comply with that duty (by seeking a waiver or other form of consent) before proceeding with research.
    - If the information was obtained in public settings, or where others would not have expected the information to be kept private (such as when a researcher chronicles personal observations at a live performance event, open to the public, and uses those observations in their analysis of the work), then it may be afforded the same ethical freedom as naturalistic observation (i.e., no REB review or consent needed).

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c. ***Potential risk/harm for others from disclosure*** – Is there any potential for negative impact on individuals/groups as a result of disclosing this information in the research dissemination?
    - If so, REB review may be required, and these individuals/groups may need to be consulted prior to including them in the research in order to obtain their consent.
    - Caveats: In some fields (e.g., the arts), public critique is expected and this risk would not be a determining factor for requiring REB review. Also, TPCS2 Article 3.6 discusses the ethical conduct of projects related to critical inquiry, which might be relevant when determining potential risks/harms to groups, organizations, etc. and the applicable research ethics requirements.

Submission Guidelines when an REB application is needed:
If you have determined that REB review is needed for your research, it is important to submit an application for REB review as soon as possible. Given the nuances of self-reflective work, the 'start and end date' are not necessarily as clear-cut as other types of research methodologies. However, it is important to submit the application for review either prior to collecting any information on others (if applicable) OR at the very latest prior to submitting for publication and/or otherwise disseminating the research implicating others (i.e., to ensure the paper/presentation/etc. meets ethical standards).

When submitting the application, researchers must remember that the REB needs to understand the purpose of, and procedures associated with, all research projects involving humans under their jurisdiction. As such, when researchers are themselves the focus of the research, but others may be directly or indirectly implicated, it is important for researchers to define the ways in which the others will be involved in their projects. For example, when evaluating autoethnographic research, the REB will need to know who is involved, why those particular individuals are involved, what type of information regarding these people will be used/shared, and how this information will be presented in the dissemination.

As noted above, in the event someone may be identified in an autoethnographic project, the information being reported was collected in a setting where the other had an expectation of privacy, and/or there may be some harm or risks associated with disclosing information, consent may be required. As outlined in TCPS2 Article 5.5A, researchers may only use secondary identifiable information without consent if they can confirm, to the satisfaction of the REB, that a number of conditions, namely (a) to (f), have been met. If these conditions are not satisfied, the REB may require that researchers obtain consent for the use of previously collected identifiable information or may not allow inclusion of the information in research. In some instances, alterations to consent (as outlined in TCPS2 Article 3.7A) might be appropriate. One example includes requesting REB approval to obtain consent of organizations and alerting employees of an ongoing research project through posters, without requiring individual consent.

As a general rule, consent must be informed, voluntary and ongoing. That is, "others" included in autoethnographic research should be informed why and how they will be included in the research and any associated risks or harms, that their consent to such involvement is voluntary, and that they have the ability to withdraw their consent at any time without consequence.

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TCPS2 Chapter 3 describes informed consent as a process, and autoethnographers should ensure that others implicated in their work provide consent at each stage of the research to make sure participants still wish to take part as the project evolves. One practical example of this might include sharing the manuscript with the others to obtain their final consent prior to publishing.

On the other hand, there may be explicit challenges to obtaining consent. For example, requiring consent could place the researcher at risk (e.g., in the case of reflecting on prior experiences of abuse). Or, obtaining consent may be impracticable or impossible, such as if the other person being implicated in the work is deceased. If an autoethnographer answers 'yes' to key ethical issues a, b and/or c above, and it is not possible or advisable to obtain consent, then researchers need to consider the ethical implications of using such information, the way in which they intend to present their information, and any strategies they can employ to mitigate the identifiable nature of the information and the associated risks. Researchers should be cautious in these instances. In some cases, researchers may consider consulting with appropriate stakeholders (i.e., relatives, others in the community/group/organization, etc.) who would be able to advise on the appropriate use of this material. Researchers always reserve the right to request a waiver of consent from the REB, which will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis within the context of the proposed project.

Additional considerations include whether photographs or other such data sources will be included in dissemination. Consistent with other research contexts, photographic release forms are required for photos that are not publicly available, or for which there would have been an expectation of privacy. However, if such items are collected for the purposes of artistic creation as part of an autoethnographic piece within the ethical framework of the cultural sector, additional REB review may not be needed (see TCPS2 for a discussion of creative practices).

Summary:

It is the responsibility of researchers to determine if REB review is needed for their autoethnographic projects, to seek the guidance of the REB in making this determination as needed, and to provide sufficient details to the REB to support their decision and conduct their research accordingly. As with all research involving humans, it is the responsibility of researchers to consider the welfare of those implicated in their research and to conduct their research in compliance with the ethical principles of autonomy, justice and beneficence throughout the life cycle of their project. It is the opinion of the REB that if researchers are alerted to the above concerns, then often they are in the best position to initially consider whether the material implicating others may be used, and then when there is uncertainty they can ask the REB for more direction. If, during the course of any autoethnographic study, there are changes to the project as previously discussed with the REB or new information comes to light which would affect the determination previously made, these should be brought to the immediate attention of the REB for re-assessment.

References:

Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, December 2018.